

"Q 107" ↓

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Science 142 (1963) 1126.

Exobiology

Several sources have privately suggested a new journal on "exobiology," the study of extraterrestrial life. My profound objections are not to their optimism; but the field is too important to be sequestered. The policy issues of interplanetary quarantine and of large-scale expenditures in scientific programs deserve the widest critical attention; so do scientific questions that range from the origin of life to the extraction of interstellar signals from cosmic noise. A specialized journal would only isolate the field from the badly needed critical judgments of a scientific community which, in the main, is not primarily preoccupied with exobiology.

The merits of this proposal apart, it points up a serious problem in our system of communication. The motivation for a new journal is a variable mixture of idealistic enthusiasm, ego-gratification, capitalistic enterprise, and rebellion against the critical judgments of the existing establishment. Owing to the operation of the copyright laws (which here convert a common good into a private interest), the proponents of a journal have a unique advantage, whatever their motivation. At least according to present custom we are morally accountable for its content according to our profession. If our societies continue to abdicate their responsibility for scientific communications, the successors will not always be so scrupulous.

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